

A Hungarian Tragedy: An Analysis on the Destruction of the Hungarian Jews

Samuel Schonfeld

Jewish security and prosperity in Hungary, prior to the Holocaust, was never certain. Antisemitism, since the middle of the Nineteenth century, plagued Hungarian culture and society. In fact, the most prominent antisemitic movements and sentiments arose in the late 1840's, when Hungary was still a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Antisemitism continued to rise throughout the century, as the uncertainty linked to the creation of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy and the collapse of Austria-Hungary was blamed on the Jews. Antisemitic policy became rampant in 1938 when Hungary, who was now allied with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, began its territorial expansion to reclaim its lost territories from World War I. In March 1944, antisemitic policy and sentiment reached its highest point, and the Nazis transported as many Hungarian Jews as possible to concentration camps. Some individual Jews managed to stay in the Budapest Ghetto until the end of the war, but they were far and few. Nearly one hundred years after the Anti-Habsburg Revolution – a revolt which sought independence from the Habsburgs that included many pogroms against the Jews – half of the Jewish population in Hungary was depleted. My grandfather, George Schonfeld, and his immediate relatives are some of the lucky few who survived this century of antisemitism and Jew-hatred in Hungary.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how measures to solve the “Jewish Question” in Hungary evolved over time, through legislative bills, decrees, and societal norms, which in turn culminated in the extermination of the Hungarian Jews; and, it is also to do what my great-grandfather, Adolf Schonfeld, committed himself to doing: “I felt it was my duty to record the years of unspeakable horror, both as a lesson for my own grandchildren and also, hopefully, for future generations, since it seems that the recent past is soon not to be believed.”¹ To begin, this paper will define ‘Jewish Question’ as it was defined in Hungary and the world in order to establish and explain what the driving force was behind the extermination of the Hungarian Jews. Next, this paper will demonstrate how the road to the organized destruction of the Jews saw its roots in 1882, out of the Tiszaeszlár trial. Afterwards, this essay will illustrate how the antisemitic law which Hungary created in 1920 promoted the segregation of Jews from Hungarian society. Later, this document will show how the mass deportations, and the labour forced upon Hungarian Jews during the war, laid the foundations for the elimination of the Jews from Hungary. Lastly, this paper will explore how the final measures taken by the Hungarians and Nazis eradicated most of the Jewish population living in Hungary.

The ‘Jewish Question,’ which is also commonly known as the ‘Jewish Problem,’ traces its origins back to the Enlightenment era and the French Revolution. The ‘question’ arose during this period as a reactionary response to the perceived threat of the Jewish emancipation movement – that is, the elimination and removal of restrictive laws on Jews by certain countries in central and western Europe. To be more precise, the ‘Jewish Question’ was a response to the Haskalah, a Jewish movement for the legal and societal equality of Jews in their places of residence, and the Jewish Naturalisation Act, 1753, an act of parliament in the United Kingdom which allowed Jews who lived

¹Adolf Schonfeld, Written Account, Translated by George Schonfeld, March 1996, p.1.

in Great Britain to naturalise.² In essence, the ‘Jewish Question’ was an antisemitic debate about what Europeans should do to protect themselves and purge themselves of and from the Jews. The public was uncertain, and debates about the ‘Jewish Question’ continued until and after the Holocaust (the existence of the state of Israel, some have said, is itself a response to the ‘Jewish Problem’). In essence, understanding the nature of the ‘Jewish Question’ is important because it allows one to understand how and why individuals in Hungary and Europe responded and reacted in the way that did to Jews. Furthermore, understanding the ‘Jewish Question’ is one of the only ways to understand how and why the Holocaust and the destruction of the Jews occurred – the systematic elimination of the Jews was just one of the many significant and decisive responses to this question.

Nineteenth century Hungary was an unsafe geographical location – especially for Jews. Even before the Anti-Habsburg Revolution, anti-Jewish sentiment existed. However, William O. McCagg, Jr. states that “in 1840 the Magyar noble Diet abolished most residential restrictions upon Jews.”³ Jews acquired better living conditions after 1867, for the “Magyar government sought to keep Jewish support ... by legally emancipating the Jews”.⁴ Nonetheless, the Anti-Habsburg Revolution, in 1848, and the creation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in 1867, gave rise to greater waves of antisemitism. Propaganda in newspapers promoted anti-Jewish sentiment; a cartoon from a newspaper, made in 1870, depicted an image of a young Jew stealing boots and running away from a police officer.⁵ Nearly a decade later, antisemitism spread into the political sphere. Indeed, as Randolph L. Braham and Paul Hanebrink write, “it was in fact during the Golden Era [– the period after the creation of the dual monarchy –] that the International Anti-Semitic League was organized in Budapest and a notorious blood libel case was tried in Tiszaeszlár”.⁶ It was in this blood libel case that the first organizational steps towards the elimination of the Hungarian Jews were taken. Robert Nemes notes that organized antisemitism “all began with small-town murder investigations and ended with widespread communal violence, angry newspaper debates, and sustained antisemitic agitation and organization”.⁷ “The catalyst” of much of the organized violence that occurred “was the blood libel case,” for it claimed that “Jews ritually murdered Christian children in order to use their blood in matzos”.⁸ In particular, the case was about “a 14-year old Calvinist Servant girl named Eszter Solymosi [who] disappeared from the village of Tiszaeszlár”.⁹ At the end of the trial, the judge “exonerated” the Jews, but the exoneration led to “a wave of anti-Jewish riots [that] swept the country”.¹⁰ As a result of these riots, a group of parliamentary antisemites founded the National Antisemitic Party in 1883. Although the party did not survive long, it capitalized on the

² Bonnie Latimer, “Samuel Richardson and the ‘Jew Bill’ of 1753: A New Political Context for Sir Charles Grandison,” *The Review of English Studies* 275, no. 66 (2015): 520-539.

³ William O. McCagg Jr., “Jews in Revolution: The Hungarian Experience,” *Journal of Social History* 6, no.1 (Autumn 1972), p.80.

⁴ McCagg, “Jews in Revolution,” p.80.

⁵ Hungarian Trade and Hospitality Museum. Sunday Newspaper - reproduction. Excerpt from the newspaper, the picture shows a gendarme, which is a drawing by János Zahoray (July 17, 1870).

⁶ Randolph L. Braham and Paul Hanebrink, “The Holocaust in Hungary: A Critical Analysis,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2020), p. 1-17.

⁷ Robert Nemes, “Hungary’s Antisemitic Provinces: Violence and Ritual Murder in the 1880s,” *Slavic Review* 66, no.1 (Spring 2007), p.20.

⁸ Nemes, “Hungary’s Antisemitic Provinces,” p.21.

⁹ Nemes, “Hungary’s Antisemitic Provinces,” p.21.

¹⁰ Nemes, “Hungary’s Antisemitic Provinces,” p.22.

rampant antisemitism in the nation, and it illustrated the extent to which antisemitism had ingrained itself in Hungarian society. Ultimately, by illustrating the extent to which anti-Jewish sentiment could be harnessed for political endeavours in Hungary, the new party laid the foundation for future antisemitic rhetoric in legislature and for the exclusion of Jews from society.

The exclusion of Jews from European society did not begin with the *Nuremberg Race Laws of September 1935* in Nazi Germany. The first instance of legislative discrimination in Europe after World War I occurred in Hungary. *The Numerus Clausus Act of 1920* – the act which placed limits on the number of Jews enrolled in the universities by restricting their enrollment to the percentage of the national population which they represented – was the first manifestation of legislative antisemitism. This law was enacted to secure employment opportunities for Hungarian Christians. Peter Tibor Nagy writes that the Hungarian Christian middle class predominantly occupied “state” and “local government offices, while the Jewish middle classes had sent their sons to work in non-state-controlled sectors”.¹¹ This became an issue “after the 1920 Trianon Peace Treaty, which greatly reduced Hungary’s territory, [so] the country needed far fewer public officials. This meant that the Christian middle classes were obliged to secure positions outside the state-controlled areas”.¹² By preventing entry to higher education for Jews, the government created opportunities for more Hungarian Christians to enter universities. Thus, Christians began to acquire the necessary skills to work in the professions, whereas the Jews began to lose these skills. Also, Béla Bodó, an acclaimed rabbi, claims that the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the loss “of historical Hungary” caused the importance of the Jewish population to decline.¹³ Indeed, Bodó explained that “the democratic revolution, the Soviet Republic and the Red Terror traumatized the liberal and conservative middle and upper classes. Since Jews played an important role in the democratic revolution and the Communist experiment, they became automatic targets of reprisal after August 1919”.¹⁴ The anti-Jewish sentiments that prevailed in 1883 persisted, and “with the explicit support of the Christian churches and cultural elite,” the *Numerus Clausus Act* became legislation in “September 1920”.¹⁵ The consequences of the *Numerus Clausus Act* were detrimental to the Jewish population. They excluded Jews from the Hungarian workforce because Jews could no longer attend university and, as Mrs. Andai Katalin Erdős stated in her personal testimony, it became difficult for Jews to attend school: “the Jewish High for Girls [were exclusively for the] very good [Jewish] students whose fees were waived [or for] the children of the Jewish elite”.¹⁶ In essence, the antisemitism that was ubiquitous in Hungarian society, in combination with the uncertainty that came with the dissolution of its monarchy and its former nation, promoted the legislative exclusion of Jews from society and education. Eventually, this segregation evolved into the physical removal of the Hungarian Jews.

¹¹ Peter Tibor Nagy, “The Numerus Clausus in Inter-War Hungary,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 35, no.1 (January 2005), p.13-22.

¹² Nagy, “The Numerus Clausus,” p.13-22.

¹³ Béla Bodó, “The Numerus Clausus Law of 1920: Asymmetrical Dependencies, and the “Twisted Road” of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz,” *Working paper* (August 2022), p.9.

¹⁴ Bodó, “The Numerus Clausus Law,” p.9.

¹⁵ Bodó, “The Numerus Clausus Law,” p.9.

¹⁶ Andai Katalin Erdős, in the exhibition catalogue of “the Numerus Clausus vs. Women,” held at 2B Gallery, Budapest, Aug 2021, p.6.

In 1939, the Hungarian Parliament passed the “Second Jewish Law”. This law was like the Nuremberg Laws implemented in Germany; the law determined who was a Jew based upon racial categorization through an individual’s ancestry.¹⁷ It also placed greater restrictions on the activities which Jews could pursue, and it imposed severe economic sanctions on Jews.¹⁸ However, the “Second Jewish Law” had a unique aspect: it proclaimed that the government had the ability to remove Jews from the country and to expropriate their property.¹⁹ Indeed, “Act IV of 1939 on the Limitation of Jewish Expansion in Public and Economic Spheres (Second ‘Jewish Law’)” stated that “Jewish assets” may be “moved abroad” and that “the government may also issue decrees about customs, as well as other regulations deemed necessary for the protection of national assets in connection with the promotion of Jewish emigration”.²⁰ Furthermore, on June 30, 1941, the Mayor of Rimaszombat, Rimavská Sobota, created city regulations to bar Jews from public life. It became illegal to serve “lard to Jews”; for “Jews and for wholesale buyers to make purchases before 10 a.m.”; and for Jews to assemble “in public places... Two or more persons is considered an assembly”.²¹ Hungarian society expressed no objections to the law, or these regulations, as antisemitism had spread throughout the nation’s culture. Miklós Kállay, who served as the Hungarian Prime Minister during World War II, is also partially responsible for the adoption of antisemitism in Hungarian society and legislatur. Yehuda Don notes that Hungary was able to pursue these measures because Kallay promoted antisemitic feelings: “his oratory in public was as antisemitic as that of his predecessors”.²² The law’s powers did not end at deportation; it created the foundation for Hungary to write legislation which imposed forced manual labour on its Jewish citizens. My great-grandfather, Adolf Schonfeld (we called him Apu), was occasionally compelled to perform this labour. In his account of the events, Apu states that “commandants and taskmasters were a selected group of Hungarian anti-Semitic sadists who took full advantage of their positions”.²³ Apu was forced to stand in for “the eight horses that had been used in summer and winter to carry heavy telegraph poles up the steep mountain slopes”.²⁴ Once again, Hungarian society did not contest the ill-treatment of the Jews. The seeds of antisemitism had already begun to flourish. As a result, the government, by making it legal to deport Jews and to claim their property, promoted the elimination of its Jews from society, and endorsed the usage of Jews as slave labour. By ingraining these antisemitic beliefs into Hungarian society, the law was a stepping-stone in the extermination of the Jews in Hungary. In the end, it led to the Final Solution for Hungarian Jews.²⁵

¹⁷Act IV of 1939 on the Limitation of Jewish Expansion in Public and Economic Spheres.

¹⁸Act IV of 1939.

¹⁹Act IV of 1939.

²⁰ Act IV of 1939.

²¹ City regulations and the attached statement of reasons, issued by the Rimaszombat municipal authorities, June 1941.

²² Yehuda Don, “The Economic Effect of Antisemitic Discrimination: Hungarian Anti-Jewish Legislation, 1938-1944,” *Jewish Social Studies* 48, no.1 (Winter 1986), p.75.

²³ Adolf Schonfeld, p.1.

²⁴ Adolf Schonfeld, p.2.

²⁵ The ‘Final Solution’ is often referred to as the final response to the Jews – that is, the systematic killing, elimination, and obliteration of the Jews in all Nazi and Nazi-allied/occupied territories. It is widely viewed as the outcome of the culmination of antisemitic rules and laws which continued to emerge nearing the end of World War II. It is most often associated with Nazi Germany, but it was a widespread policy in German-allied countries during this time.

Hungary turned to more drastic measures to resolve their “Jewish Question” during World War II. On July 12, 1941, the Hungarian Royal Minister of the Interior declared that “in light of the present foreign affairs situation, it has become possible to remove from the territory of the country unsuitable aliens and foreign citizens against whom the final expulsion order or denial of a residential permit have not, until now, been carried out effectively”.²⁶ The Hungarian government now had the precedent to deport its Jews. Furthermore, Norman J.W. Goda writes that “the first large scale massacre” in Ukraine involved “Hungary”.²⁷ Hungary no longer wanted its Jews and “hoped to dump the Jews from their newly acquired regions into German-occupied Ukraine”.²⁸ It already knew their fate, and “in mid-July 1941, Hungarian police rounded up Jews” and “by August, some 14,000 were crammed into freight cars” and deported to “German-occupied Ukraine”.²⁹ Shortly after this deportation, “on August 26 and 27,” over the course of only seventy-two hours, “German, Ukrainian, and Hungarian policemen murdered 23,600 Jews”.³⁰ However, the greatest period of extermination for the Jews in Hungary began in March, 1944, when the Nazis occupied Hungary. Szabolcs Szita claims that “the German occupation spelled ultimate tragedy for the approximately 850,000 Jews living in Hungary”.³¹ The repercussions of the Nazi’s occupation varied across the nation for the Jews. My great-aunt, Vera, in her account of the Holocaust in Hungary, illustrates the differing repercussions for Jews across Hungary. Vera grew up “in a rural Hungarian town called Derecske”.³² But, “in 1942, [Apu] decided to move to Debrecen, a city 20 km away”.³³ She claimed that her family’s move to Debrecen saved their lives because “not one Jew from Derecske who lived there during the round-ups survived the Holocaust”.³⁴ Vera and my grandfather were some of the few Jews who did not perish during the Holocaust: “at one point, [they] were on [their] way to Auschwitz, but miraculously the train turned back and [they] ended up in Austria until December when [they] were taken to Bergen-Belsen”.³⁵ Many Hungarian Jews, especially those sent at the beginning of the Nazi-occupation, died in Auschwitz: “437,402 Jews [were] sent to Auschwitz in just eight weeks”.³⁶ According to the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre, “by the end of the Holocaust, 565,000 Hungarian Jews had been murdered”.³⁷ Ultimately, it was the mass deportations and the wide-spread massacres which the Hungarians and the Nazis pursued during World War II that culminated in the rapid extermination of over half of the Jewish population of pre-war Hungary. Additionally, the mass murder of the Jews exemplified the continually evolving response to the “Jewish Question” in Hungary; the Hungarian government increased its

²⁶ Decree of the Minister of the Interior, July 12, 1941.

²⁷ Norman J.W. Goda, *The Holocaust: Europe, the World, and the Jews, 1918-1945* (New York: Routledge, 2022), p.175.

²⁸ Goda, *The Holocaust*, p.175.

²⁹ Goda, *The Holocaust*, p.175.

³⁰ Goda, *The Holocaust*, p.175.

³¹ Szabolcs Szit, *Trading in Lives?: Operations of the Jewish Relief and Rescue Committee in Budapest, 1944-1945*, (Budapest: Central European university Press, 2005), p.20.

³² Vera Koppel, Written Account, Translated by George Schonfeld, March 1996, p.17.

³³ Vera Koppel, p.17.

³⁴ Vera Koppel, p.17.

³⁵ Vera Koppel, p.17.

³⁶ Goda, *The Holocaust*, p.292.

³⁷ “Murder of Hungarian Jewry,” The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, accessed December 2, 2022, <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/fate-of-jews/hungary.html>.

measures in the Twentieth century as it went from segregating Jews from society, to deporting Jews and using Jews as slave labour, to exterminating the Jewish race.

On 27 January 1945, Auschwitz was liberated by the Red Army. By the end of the war, of the six million Jews who died during the Holocaust, half a million were Hungarian. However, the writing of this paper comes at an important time, as memory of the Holocaust is beginning to fade away. NBC News reports that “a fifth of millennials aren’t sure if they’ve ever heard of the Holocaust”.³⁸ Furthermore, *Le Monde* writes that “according to a survey, 23% of 18-40 year olds believe that the number of Jewish victims has been greatly exaggerated” in the Netherlands.³⁹ Although it is true that elements of the past are often forgotten, the Holocaust is one of the most important events in world history. It shapes and guides the legal precedents of the United Nations International Criminal Court, and it influences the ways in which Jews exist today. Above all, it is important to remember the Holocaust so that atrocities of this nature do not occur again. My great-grandfather’s mission was to tell this story to ensure that it would never happen again – I fear it will also be my great-grandchild’s mission.

The path to the destruction of Hungary’s Jews gradually evolved over time. It began by cultivating organized antisemitism in Hungarian culture through the blood libel case; next, it evolved into the legislative segregation of Jews from Hungarian society; later, it progressed into the deportation of the Jews and the imposition of forced labour on the Jews; and, it concluded with the liquidation of the Jews at the hands of the Nazis and Hungarians. Although the Holocaust may be over in Hungary, antisemitism and Hungarian nationalism still plague the nation. Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, is a prime example of the dangerous forces that persist in Hungary. Hence, the dreadful question persists – the Hungarian “Jewish Question”.

³⁸ Courtney McGee, “Study Shows Americans are Forgetting About the Holocaust,” *NBC News*, 12 April, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/study-shows-americans-are-forgetting-about-holocaust-n865396>.

³⁹ Jean-Pierre Stroobants, “Study Shows Shockingly High Levels of Holocaust Denial in the Netherlands,” *Le Monde*, 1 March, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/religions/article/2023/01/27/study-shows-shockingly-high-levels-of-holocaust-denial-in-the-netherlands_6013392_63.html.

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